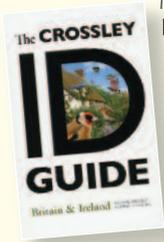


# BOOK REVIEWS

The book reviews published in *Scottish Birds* reflect the views of the named reviewers and not those of the SOC.

**The Crossley ID Guide - Britain and Ireland.** Richard Crossley & Dominic Couzens, 2014. Princeton University Press, ISBN 978-0-691-15194-6, paper flexibound, 304 pages, £16.95.



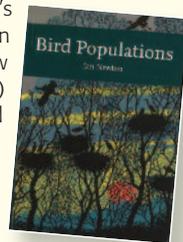
Much has already been written on this 'different' ID guide. Dominated by large colour photos depicting birds in a range of plumages and poses 'in their natural habitats', at first sight the book is naturally appealing - I tested it on the non-birding members of my family and all were immediately positive (son, seven years: "This book is really good", but quickly spotted: "These pictures are all animated", i.e. digitally manipulated). Realising the images have indeed been patched together essentially by dropping the birds onto the habitat backgrounds, you realise this is something totally different, and likely to set the hairs of any conventional wildlife photographer on end! While many of the scenes and individual photos are stunning and full of interest, others look rather more contrived - putting birds into water has clearly been a significant challenge. I also struggled with the apparently inconsistent perspective in a few. And whilst I can also see some potential value for ID in having a great variety of views of any given species I doubt I would be inclined to turn to it myself in preference to a conventional guide - of limited value in separating Meadow/Tree Pipit, or juvenile Herring/Yellow-legged Gulls.

The introductory commentary is thoughtful and conveys the purpose of the book - not as a field guide *per se* but to inspire reader interaction and understanding of a bird's place in its environment. Thus the main audience is intended to be beginner and intermediate birders. Setting to one side the odd artificial, unnatural or jarring image, I think it ought to succeed in this aim of engaging interest. Finally - personal favourites (it's that kind of book): scoters, storm petrels, curlews & godwits, grouse, nearly all the raptors, woodpeckers, doves, tits, Nuthatch, flycatchers, chats, sparrows - all superb, but our own Crested Tit is hard to beat.

*Stephen Welch*

**Bird Populations.** Ian Newton, 2013. Harper Collins, London, ISBN 978-0-00-742953-0, hardback, 596 pages, £55.00.

Ian Newton's previous book in the New Naturalist (NN) series was 'Bird Migration'. His latest contribution to the NN library deals with



another enormous topic - bird populations. At nearly 600 pages, this is not a light, or quick, read. However, as you would expect from one of the pre-eminent ornithologists of the day, this is a wonderfully clear discourse on the wide range of factors that impact on bird populations. In the author's own words, this is a book about bird numbers - what controls and influences them; why are some species increasing and others

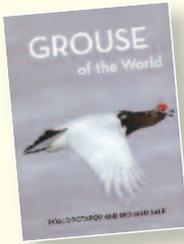
decreasing and so on. Natural factors, such as competition for food and nesting sites (between and within species) are considered, as well as human influences; the chapters on managed hunting and 'other bird killing' (which includes persecution) deal with some of the more controversial issues currently faced by many species of bird and are of particular relevance in Scotland today. Each issue is illustrated by reference to detailed studies of many species and this is where the particular joy of the book lies, with fascinating insights at every turn of the page. A wonderful book.

*Andrew Bielinski*

**Grouse of the World.** Ronald Potapov & Richard Sale, 2013. New Holland, London, ISBN 978 1 78009 250 8, hardback, 408 pages, £29.99.

The grouse family (Tetraonidae) has provided a fascinating group of species to study, showing a high degree of adaptation to the varied environments they occupy throughout the world. They have been particularly well studied in Scotland, resulting in one of the most detailed avian population studies in the world on Red Grouse, currently treated as a subspecies of the Willow Grouse.

The first chapter provides an overview of grouse systematics, evolution, adaptation and behaviour and is based on an extensive literature review. The book reveals some fascinating insights into grouse behaviour and adaptations, including their ability to survive heavy snow and low temperatures in northern climes by digging snow holes using their specially adapted feet.



The following eight chapters cover the 19 species in the family, including details on morphology, distribution, population, behaviour and breeding ecology. It was disappointing not to see much data on the population dynamics of some species, however this can be found elsewhere.

The final chapter covers the current status of grouse and the conservation threats they face, many of which we are all too familiar with in Scotland, such as habitat loss and degradation, over hunting and predation.

This is the first comprehensive guide to the family and includes many drawings, maps and photographs. Some drawings seem a bit dated in style; however, the 36-page bibliography is testament to the extensive amount of research that has gone into this book. Anyone who wants to understand this family from a global perspective should definitely read this book.

**Mike Thornton**

**The Life of David Lack: father of evolutionary ecology.** Ted R. Anderson, 2013. Oxford University Press, USA, ISBN 978-0-19-992264-2, hardback, 246 pages, £37.50.

Although Ted Anderson never knew David Lack, his meticulous research ensures that Lack's character emerges with real clarity. Lack's 'unofficial mentor' was Julian Huxley, one of the founders of the study of animal behaviour, but 'behaviour' failed to rub off on Lack, who remained firmly wedded to avian ecology,

to which he contributed perhaps more than anybody else. His *Life of the Robin*, which included relatively little on behaviour, was his first main contribution to ecology and embodied the clarity and penetration which marked all his writing.

Ted Anderson has thoroughly researched the background to the 13 chapters of his wide-ranging book; many of the headings use Lack's publications to illustrate parts of his life. His impressive grasp of detail illuminates his account of Lack's character as a boy and his early passion for bird watching. And for singing in the choir! He gives an interesting account of David's extracurricular activities at school, which included rugby, cricket and chess.

Anderson mentions Lack's phenomenal focus on detail, which captivates his readers. 'The significance of clutch-size' is the most frequently cited paper ever published in the journal *Ibis*. 'The Natural Regulation of Animal Numbers' had a huge impact on population ecology and has been cited more than 3,400 times.

The final section of this book, by describing the significant careers of all the researchers who worked with or for him, testifies to Lack's huge impact.

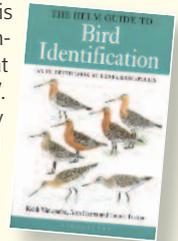


Anderson has provided a fine and eminently readable tribute to a highly productive ecologist.

**J. Bryan Nelson**

**The Helm Guide to Bird Identification.** Keith Vinicombe, Alan Harris & Laurel Tucker, 2014. Christopher Helm, London, ISBN 978-1-4081-3035-3, paperback, 396 pages, £25.00.

This book is subtitled 'an in-depth look at confusion species'. That is exactly what it is, based on an earlier identification guide published in 1989, but significantly expanded to encompass many more of those difficult species in odd plumages, for example, eclipse ducks, autumn warblers and immature gulls. Interestingly, only one-third of the text concerns passerines.



Following short sections on the use of the book and tips on identification, topography and moult, there are 350 pages of text and 1,250 illustrations. Coverage is mainly of regularly occurring British species but rarer species are described when confusion with commoner birds is likely, e.g. pipits and warblers. Species texts include general features such as size and behaviour, followed by plumage stages, flight identification and vocalisations. Guidance is given on the time of year a species is most likely to be found in Britain.

It is perhaps rather uncharitable to level any criticism, as the content is so good. The taxonomy departs in some instances from the latest checklist of British birds (August 2013 - no surprise there!) and many of the illustrations have been derived from the earlier work, achieving a less pleasing, darker, greyer, cast in the process. Despite the claim that it is suitable for birders of all

levels, relative novices may be deterred by the sheer breadth of coverage and it does not replace a standard bird guide. However, if you are into the fine detail, then this is an indispensable addition to your library.

*Norman Elkins*

**RSPB Handbook of British Birds (fourth edition).** Peter Holden & Tim Cleeves, 2014. Bloomsbury, London, ISBN 978-1-4729-0647-2, paperback, 320 pages, £9.99.



The first edition of this handbook was my first guide into the birdlife in my surrounding area and is filled with notes and ticks with lists written out in the back cover. What I have always liked about this book is that each species gets its own page with stunning illustrations and some extra wee facts such as the oldest ringed bird for that species as well as population and conservation notes. Each account also includes a distribution map which has now been updated using the data collected in the *BTO Bird Atlas 2007–11*, although one or two species maps are outdated, such as the Nuthatch for example, which still doesn't show the species spread into areas such as South Lanarkshire and Glasgow.

When you compare this edition to the older editions you notice a few extras which really help to make a cracking book even better. The family index on the inside covers are great for narrowing down where to start looking. There are new double page sections which help you to compare easily confused species in flight such as birds of prey and the gulls. The rarities section is

bigger with two new species included in this edition.

For £9.99 this book is certainly value for money and I feel the layout and text makes bird watching more accessible for people who may be put off by more comprehensive and expensive books.

*Hayley Douglas*

**Arran Bird Atlas 2007–2012.** Dr Jim Cassels for the Arran Natural History Society, 2014. Arran Natural History Society / Scottish Ornithologists' Club. ISBN: 978-0-9512139-5-7, paperback, 168 pages, £8.00, available at shops across the Isle of Arran, at SOC Aberlady, or by order through Alan and Jill Hollick at [alanandjillhollick@gmail.com](mailto:alanandjillhollick@gmail.com).

This superb Atlas reflects both the diversity of birdlife on this Clyde island, and the enthusiasm and determination of the Arran Natural History Society, ably co-ordinated on this occasion by Dr Jim Cassels. Whilst national atlases usually use 10-km squares as the basic grid, in which not all tetrads (2 km x 2 km squares) are covered, it was decided on Arran that all 139 tetrads would form the reporting grid, each one the subject of winter and breeding season Timed Tetrad Visits in addition to Roving Records. With a very small resident birding population, this set the organisers quite a challenge, and it was decided to complete the fieldwork over five years rather than the four for the national Atlas. Much assistance was provided by the many visitors to the island, and in



total over 700 people submitted over 36,000 records on 177 species during those five years.

The Atlas begins with a simple and well set-out introduction, describing the island and how the data were collected. The introduction includes maps of recording effort for both winter and breeding seasons, species richness maps for both seasons, and special maps for red and amber listed species. The formats of the subsequent species accounts are clearly set out, and the small size of the island allows the maps for each species to be very clear, with well defined colour coding.

Each species account, sometimes one per page, sometimes two, includes a photograph, a fact box giving the number of tetrads in which the species was recorded in the breeding season and/or in winter, and trends on Arran going back to the first national Atlas commenced in 1968. This is followed by the maps showing, as appropriate, breeding and winter distribution and, where there was adequate data, relative abundance maps. Maps are not included for sensitive species. A brief description of the status of each species concludes each account.

It is again testimony to the organisers that they were able to produce this high-quality Atlas within 20 months of the end of fieldwork. Not only does it add to the scientific knowledge about this island but with its handy and manageable size and attractive price it may attract many more visitors to the island. And who knows, they may be able to help the organisers in their next project, allocating all sightings to 1-km squares to form the basis for the next Arran bird atlas.

*Mike Betts*